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TRANSMITTED VIA FACSIMILE, E-MAIL, AND U.S. MAIL

July 19, 2005

Letters to the Editor
The Des Moines Register
P.O. Box 957
Des Moines, IA 50304

To the Editor:

Much has been reported about Polk and Jasper County returning their restaurant inspection programs to State oversight. *The Des Moines Register's* editorial writers ("Don't Allow Lag in Restaurant Inspections" – 7/15/2005) suggested that restaurant inspections will lag and unsanitary operations will go unchecked. Media reporting on this matter has been flawed. Left uncorrected, misinformation could cause unnecessarily concern among restaurant patrons. I write you now to set the record straight.

Food inspection is a State responsibility managed by the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals (DIA). Before the transfer of oversight recently reported on, nine State inspectors had responsibility to inspect restaurants in 20 counties. The remainder of the state was inspected by various governmental entities under contract with DIA.

Recent reporting suggested that State law requires a single annual inspection. To the contrary, all restaurants must undergo two inspections annually unless a risk-based inspection process is used. Under a risk-based system, high-volume restaurants that serve a wide-variety of "made-from-scratch" foods are subject to up to three inspections per year. DIA's inspectors used the risk-based system in the 2,700 restaurants they inspected. This amounted to, on average, 5,400 inspections each year.

Polk and Jasper County restaurants add another 2,500 locations that will be inspected by State inspectors. This means that DIA employees will be responsible for inspecting around 5,200 restaurants. **How can we do this without lagging behind or failing to identify possible unchecked sanitary operations?**

Historically, Polk County and most of our contracts inspected once annually. Fiscal limitations caused the less frequent inspection cycle. State inspectors will maintain the single annual inspection cycle in Polk, Jasper and the other 20 counties under State oversight. Complaints will be investigated and

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unsanitary conditions will not go unchecked. The math is relatively simple. State inspectors will conduct 5,200 annual inspections—about 200 less than before. Restaurants previously visited a couple of times per year by State inspectors will only be inspected once. This is unfortunate, but a reality of adjusting competing priorities.

The level of food safety oversight in Polk County and the Greater Des Moines area will not be compromised. Most recently, a state inspector responded to a State Fire Marshall request within one hour to a restaurant damaged by fire. A new restaurant received its food license the Monday following my eating there over the weekend—it had been inspected by Polk County but a license had yet to be issued.

Polk and Jasper County do not deserve a “thistle.” (*The Sunday Register*, 7/17/05). For far more years than should be expected, both counties hung onto their restaurant inspection program despite a recognized lack of sufficient resources to operate this essential public health program. Polk and Jasper County should be applauded for their efforts until they could last no longer.

DIA has long recognized the need to increase restaurant inspection fees. Five out of the last six years DIA sponsored legislation and/or lobbied to increase funding for this vital public service (not just the past two years as reported). The off year the department proposed adopting the most recent federally approved Food Code. This proposal met without success. A legislative proposal by one association would have favored that association’s conducting food training (something DIA already does and sponsors). Restaurants participating in the training would have received a discount on their inspection fee. Fee revenue would have actually been dramatically reduced, making the current situation even worse.

DIA has sufficient resources to carry out restaurant inspections in all counties under its oversight. We have and will redirect resources to cover Polk and Jasper County. Interestingly, when a county turns its restaurant inspection program back to the State, DIA cannot collect the fee to supplement the hire of new inspectors. These fees are deposited directly into the State treasury. DIA has proposed legislation to permit the department to collect and use these fees to cover inspections. This legislation, too, was unsuccessful.

Iowans should not “lose their appetites” for eating out. While DIA’s resources will be stretched thin, State inspectors will continue to perform their duties diligently and public health will be protected. State inspectors deserve a “rose,” and should not have to be reading media accounts suggesting they can’t do their jobs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve Young". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

STEVEN K. YOUNG, Director
DIA